**Valiant Hearts: The Great War – An Interactive Gaming Lesson on World War I**

**Name:** Matthew Miller **Course:** European/World History

**Objectives of lesson:**

Students will be able to identify key tools and concepts from World War I.  
Students will gain a greater understanding of the complex experiences of those who lived during the events of World War I.

**Learning principles & subject areas incorporated into lesson:**

*Learning Principles*

- Exploration

- Risk-Taking

- Situated Meanings  
- System Thinking  
- Lateral Thinking and Problem Solving  
- Automatic Feedback/Response

*Subject Areas*

- Nationalism, Mobilization, and Conscription

- Trench Warfare and Lifestyles  
- Modern Weapons, Technologies and Biological Warfare  
- Ancillary Theaters of War: POW Camps, Hospitals, the Home-front

- Personal Accounts/Commentary/Soldiers’ Experiences in WWI  
- Impact of War

**Material used in the lesson:**

Valiant Hearts: The Great War, a puzzle-oriented historical videogame produced by Ubisoft Montpelier, endorsed by Mission Centaire 14-18[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Timetables and progression of the lesson:**It should be noted this intended to be a multi-day activity to make full use of the material.

(25-30 minutes) Students will be either paired off, work in small groups, or will conduct this portion individually depending on the availability of computer resources. Students will play through several missions (usually 2 or 3) as time allows. For example, if proceeding from the beginning, students will play through Chapter 1: Dark Clouds Missions 1-3 (Casern, Marne Battle, Neuve Chapelle). In each mission, as part of completing the puzzle, students must find the hidden artifacts and diary entries dispersed throughout each level and read the descriptions for each. They will be provided with a checklist/guide to help give a general idea as to what and how many objects they should be looking for.

(25-30 minutes) Students must share with the class objects they found interesting, notable, or had questions concerning. Students are also encouraged to circulate around the room to work with others to find hidden artifacts they may have missed. Teachers may also you this a jumping off point for discussions regarding the macro or micro aspects of World War I addressed in each mission.

**Learning styles addressed:**

Visual, aural, reading-preference learners, and kinesthetic learners will all benefit from the game for varying reasons. The game’s graphic-novel style visuals that are omni-present throughout the game as well as the photographs and models of historical collectibles will be well suited for visual learners. Aural learners will appreciate from the narrations between each mission that helps drive the overall narrative forward. Reading-preference learners will enjoy reading the historical facts unlocked with the successful completion of each mission. Kinesthetic learners will enjoy the ability to physically play the game as opposed to observing a demonstration. Gaming literate students will conceivably excel in these tasks.

**Anticipated student response:**

Students will hopefully this interactive and experiential learning activity and have a better understanding of the conduct of battle in World War I, the technologies used, and the impact of trench warfare. In addition to learning about the progression of World War I through its battles, students will also gain a greater appreciation of the smaller and personal details of the lives of soldiers and others embroiled in the conflict.

**Possible means of assessment of student learning:**

The instructor can circulate the room/workspace/computer lab as the students are playing the game, offering suggestions and advice if a student seems stuck on a puzzle. Students can be assessed through a historical collectible quiz where they are asked to identify key facts about the collectibles in question. Students can also be asked to creatively write a letter from the perspective of one of the characters involved/a soldier in World War I, referencing at least 5 of the collectibles found and relating their function.

**Valiant Hearts Checklist (Example)**

**Directions:** In Chapter 1, there are 35 historical collectibles spread across 6 missions. Your goal is to not only solve the puzzles and survive as best you can, but to find each at least 20 of them. Bonus points will be awarded for finding extra collectibles. After completing your missions for the day, you may assist your squad mates in finding other collectibles. A checklist has been compiled for you, so keep an eye out for these particular items.

**Chapter 1 – Historical Items Locations Guide**

**Mission 1: Casern**

Item #1: German helmet.

Item #2: Tinder lighter.

Item #3: Stationmaster’s Whistle.

Item #4: Letter from French Soldier, August 14, 1914.

Item #5: Metal nib.

**Mission 2: Marne Battle**

Item #6: French identification tag.

Item #7: Gold button from French uniform.

Item #8: HQ Map.

Item #9: German cartridges.

Item #10: Embroidery.

Item #11: Letter from a German soldier, September 6, 1914.

**Mission 3: Neuve-Chapelle**

Item #12: Photo frame.

Item #13: Valiant Stories Contest memorabilia.

Item #14: Crucifix.

Item #15: Compass.

Item #16: French Coins.

Item #17: Khukuri knife.

**Mission 4: Ypres**

Item #18: Canadian identification tag.

Item #19: Urine soaked cloth.

Item #20: Letter from Canadian soldier.

Item #21: Gas canister deployment strategy.

Item #22: Belgian Shako.

Item #23: Pocket watch.

**Mission 5: No Collectibles**  
**Mission 6: Neuville-Saint-Vast**

Item #24: Periscope.

Item #25: Infantryman’s flask.

Item #26: Vial of nevrostenine.

Item #27: Letter from a German soldier.

Item #28: Tin of sardines.

Item #29: British coins.

**Mission 7: Reims**

Item #30: Safety razor.

Item #31: Advertising brochure.

Item #32: Overalls.

Item #33: War Godmother certificate.

Item #34: Early gas mask.

Item #35: Active Service Paybook.

**Commentary**

This lesson seeks to utilize the growing trend of using videogames in the classroom. Video games are fast becoming ubiquitous as advances in technology have removed many of the previous constraints on the media, making it available in varying forms from applications on smartphones, to apps running inside social media sites, as well more traditional mediums such as computers and consoles. Furthermore, the maturity of gaming and game developers has grown significantly in the last decade, producing complex, intellectually challenging, stimulating games that tackle serious themes and subjects that can play a suitable role as education tools. Perhaps most importantly, gaming is a fast growing shared literacy among a large portion of students, especially Millennials and is a new literacy that might hold the significant pedagogical promise. (Kellinger, 2012) Schools face the common problem of inspiring students to enjoy subjects that are long, hard, and complex. Gaming seemingly provides an ideal solution as good videogames incorporate solid, research supported principles of learning providing merciless challenges for the player who nevertheless finds this motivating and entertaining and is even willing to pay for it. (Gee, 2005) By following the gaming trend and utilizing videogames in the classroom, teachers can provide “immersive environments in which students play different roles in order to solve authentic, context-embedded environments to promote interactive, constructivist-learning” that simultaneously embraces a fast-emerging new literacy. (Kellinger, 2012) Traditional text and lecture methods, especially in history, mostly benefit aural learners and to some extent visual learners depending on the visual props utilized by the instructor. Additionally, these methods encourage passive activity that may not fully engage students or reach to their hidden literacies. Compared to the sciences, which can draw upon conducted experiments to provide corroboration of materials gained through reading and listening, history students must visualize scenarios in their mind, but are often afforded no demonstrations or experiments to allow students to corroborate the images they have created. Through the activity of playing and discussing *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, the primary goal is to make history more experiential for students, connecting text and visible action in a manner that it provides for greater comprehension of a complex period in world history while also building crucial learning skills in an enjoyable and motivating context.

There are undoubtedly drawbacks and obstacles to using gaming as a tool for instruction. Chief among them is the games themselves. Videogames must be carefully chosen based first and foremost on whether the game embeds the learning within the game or separates learning from the game entirely (Kellinger, 2012) “If your spaceship requires you to answer the math problem before you can use your blasters, chances are you’ll hate the math and the game.” (Kellinger, 2012) Secondly, games to a degree, lack the breadth of subjects covered in other mediums nor are they principally designed with education in mind. Thus the games are limited in the material that they cover and can only be used in certain lessons. This is easily countered, however, by supplementing the game with additional resources to provide a fuller educational experience. Third, using videogames as a teaching tool requires a significant amount of familiarity with the gaming medium as well as the game itself. Teachers might find this initial obstacle too insurmountable either due to age (a common misconception), a lack of fine-motor coordination skills needed to play the game, or influenced by old-establishment biases that diminish newer forms of media as less-respected forms of art and a devalue them as resources for education. Lastly, utilizing videogames requires a significant investment of time both inside and outside the classroom. The instructor must devote substantial time playing through the entire game in order to best design a curriculum and to be comfortable assisting students over the course of the lesson. In the classroom, the activities can quickly become lengthy as the best games are often designed as 10-15 hour experiences. However, not all games must be played from beginning to end to impart the necessary skill and academic impact. Many games offer the ability to “skip ahead” chapters, thus teachers can hand selected the portions of the game they wish to utilize in their lessons.

In the example lesson plan provided above, the goal of using *Valiant Hearts* as an educational tool is experiential learning, an opportunity not often afforded in teaching history. The game provides a simulation of the experiences of World War I in the same way a physics experiment with a pendulum provides a simulation of Earth’s rotation. In addition to developing essential problem solving skills which are applicable well beyond history, through their exploration and discovery of the hidden collectibles, students are making connections and learning about the subject matter in a user-motivated and organic manner. Perhaps one of the more distinct advantages to using this game, is there are few, if any, barriers for ELL students or students with learning disabilities. In general, games are frequently localized for countries around the world and thus are available in a number of different languages. In this specific game, instructions in the game are provided through GUI contextual clues and always provided “just in time” or rather when the play the wants it, needs it, or can make use of it. (Gee, 2005). Furthermore, while the level structure is somewhat linear, there is no time limit and it generally allows for student’s uninhibited exploration a pace of their choosing in relation to the puzzle solving elements. Mistakes or failures in the game are not treated harshly allowing students of all abilities to approach problems numerous ways in order to find a solution. Students who have attention disorders or difficulty sitting still may find the interactive nature of this lesson rather stimulating. It should be noted that students who have significantly impaired motor-skills or are visual-impaired will be a significant disadvantage as both elements are necessary to advance in the activity. However, accommodations can be made as the student can observe or listen to a partner playing the game.

While the subject matter of the game rather limits the applicability of the techniques used in this lesson plan to others, there are general learning principles incorporated in successful games that can be utilized throughout academia such as risk-taking, agency, customization, challenge and consolidation, and system thinking to name a few. In gaming failure is encouraged as it provides the player the ability to explore and try new strategies whereas school environments offer significantly less room for risk taking. Games afford players a sense of ownership as well the ability to customize their game to fit their playing style. (Gee, 2005) Customized curricula in school would encourage real interactions between the student’s interests and the material offered. History does not always need to be approached linearly. It can also be examined thematically, allow teachers to design lesson plans that afford students greater agency in what they learn. In the course of a game, the player is challenged by a “cycle of expertise”: a certain problem repeated until the solution is automatized upon which the game proceeds to throw a new challenge that calls the original mastery into question. (Gee, 2005) Lessons should provide ample opportunities for students to consolidate their knowledge and to challenge their mastery. The best games encourage players to think beyond isolated facts, events, and skills and instead think about relationships. Examining the impact of independent actions on the world and others is not only a crucial skill that can be incorporated into a lesson plan, but is one of the key parts of learning history.

Gaming when used properly, can be a powerful tool for education that bridges language barriers, engages learners of all types, and embraces new literacies within students. Certainly I do not advocate that games be inserted ad nauseum into curriculums nor should games be used for their own sake. Specific games in specific context can greatly assist students in understanding complex and hard concepts and problems while embracing outside literacies and learning styles. More universally, the principles of gaming can be applicable to a whole variety of lesson plans. But for gaming and game-based education to truly come into its own and be an effective tool for learning, a greater change must take place. James Gee said it best during an interview this past summer on NPR: “Games and other related technologies—together of course with talk and texts—have the potential to radically change the paradigm and unless we do change the paradigm they will just be co-opted by the current grammar of schooling.” (Gee, 2014)

**Bibliography**

Games Can Advance Education: A Conversation With James Paul Gee [Interview]. (2014,7).

<http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/07/games-can-advance-education-a-conversation-with-james-paul-gee/>

Gee, J. (2005). Learning by Design: Good video games as learning machines. *E-Learning and Digital Media,* *2*(1), 5-16.

Gee, J. (2007). Semiotic Domains: Is Playing Video Games a Waste of Time? In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kellinger, J. (2012). The Flipside: Concerns About the "New Literacies" Paths Educators Might Take. *The Educational Forum,* *76*, 524-536.

Valiant Hearts - World War 1 Game Inspiration | Ubisoft (US). (2014, January 1). Retrieved October 08, 2014, from http://valianthearts.ubi.com/game/en-US/the-great-war/index.aspx

1. Mission Centenaire 14-18 is the French Commission in charge of the First World War commemorative program and creator of the "Centenary" certification which highlights the most innovative WW1-related projects. (http://valianthearts.ubi.com/game/en-US/the-great-war/index.aspx) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)